

Is your horse fit?

by Kathy G. O'Neal

Remember that last family reunion when you played volleyball and you hadn't been near a volleyball in years? Remember the day after? That is how your horse feels when you take a long ride on Saturday and he hasn't been ridden all week.

Because we are working with animals that can't talk, it is our responsibility not to take advantage of them. It seems silly that I am saying this, but we act like it is their fault when they come home sweaty and sore. The reality is a horse that is not in shape to do the job you are asking him to do may suffer long term damage physically and possibly mentally. My goal is to educate riders by providing steps to maintain a healthier, happier horse through good conditioning.

MUSCLE CONDITIONING

When a horse is not in the proper condition to do the work you have asked him to do, the dangers of muscle and skeletal fatigue are great. Normal work such as walking and trotting can be considered aerobic exercise. In order to work, muscles need fuel which is primarily carbohydrates and fats. Fuel combined with oxygen from the blood produce energy and motion.

During intense exercise, 150 heart beats per minute (bpm), oxygen is depleted more quickly than it can be supplied. Your horse's system then moves from aerobic to anaerobic. The difference is that it requires over ten times the fuel to produce the same amount of energy. This system also produces lactic acid and metabolic waste, which need to be considered. When too much lactic acid accumulates inside the muscle it becomes sore and inflamed. Through conditioning, the horse's body becomes more able to rid muscle tissue of this waste before it causes sore-



ness or damage. In extreme cases, lactic acid can build up so much that the horse's muscles can stop working properly. Usually this requires a veterinarian's care followed by a long term lay off. It can also cause the horse to be more susceptible to tying up more easily in the future.

SKELETAL CONDITIONING

Skeletal conditioning includes the bones, joints, ligaments, and tendons. When taxed these components are prone to unexpected and serious injury. Fatigued horses are more likely to fail to adjust to ever changing footing and repositioning of the rider. The compensatory changes in the skeletal structure occur much more slowly than circulatory, respiratory, and muscular conditioning. It takes five days a week and about sixty days to cause any noteworthy changes in these components.

DETERMINING FITNESS

Because of our busy schedules, we may not have time to ride five days a week, but not everyone needs a horse that fit. However, we should be aware of how fit our horse really is. The resting heart rate of the horse is between 35-45 bpm. To take your horse's pulse, you can use a stethoscope, but not everyone can fit one into his or her saddle bag. Another way is to locate the vein right behind the cheek

bone on the jaw. I have found that to be easier than finding the vein on the inside of the knee. Time the beats for 15 seconds, and multiply the number by four. After exercise, immediately dismount and take the pulse. Then walk for ten minutes and take the pulse again. If your horse is fit the heart rate will drop to 60 bpm within that time frame. If the horse stays up in the 75-80 bpm or higher, then you may have done too much for the fitness of your horse.

Hotter weather or deep footing may increase the workout intensity and affect recovery time. If the heart rate stays up, you may also consider lameness or illness as the cause. Did you know that a horse with a heart rate of 250 bpm can pump one gallon of blood per second? That's working hard!

RESPIRATION AND COOLING

The resting respiration rate is 12-15 breaths per minute. While respiration is not a good gauge of fitness, it does play an important part in thermoregulation, helping to remove heat produced during exercise. Working muscles produce heat, and respiration is one way the horse removes it. The other way is, of course, sweating. Blood vessels in the skin swell so they can hold more blood. Nothing replaces walking when cooling a horse out after exercise. If you plan to use water in the cooling process, make sure the horse's sweat

is cool before applying water. To help with your horse cooling process in winter, use sweat sheets or a trace clip. It takes a good 30 minutes to cool a sweaty horse down enough to put him away. (And brush that saddle mark off! Sorry, a pet peeve of mine!)

Walking should also have a place in your warm up exercise and conditioning. At least five minutes of walking each time you get on will help your horse loosen up and get the blood flowing. Walking is also good for tendon and ligament strength. Use walking in between gaits to let your horse recover before continuing.

PROPER WEIGHT

Weight is another aspect of conditioning. A good gage to proper weight is to run your fingers down your horse's side from front to back and see if you can feel his ribs. If you can't feel his ribs without pushing so hard that your horse moves over, then he is probably too fat, and the extra weight will hinder his fitness. I

don't like to see a horse's ribs when he is moving, but I have seen a horse or two in my day that is just too fat. Conversely, a thin horse doesn't have the carbohydrates for muscle energy and will not have very much endurance.

MAINTAINING FITNESS

After the warm weather has gone and the show season has wrapped up for the year, what is adequate to maintain a horse's minimum amount of fitness? Riding twice a week for 30 to 40 minutes is a good program, although the days need to be spread out. This way when you start up again in the spring you will not have to start from ground zero. Large oscillations in fitness may be detrimental to long-term soundness. The older the horse, the more important it is to maintain a regular fitness program. It takes them longer to regain fitness after it is lost. After a short term layoff of a month or less, there is little loss of cardiovascular condition. More than a month, there is greater loss

of cardiovascular condition multiplied by musculoskeletal condition decline, and this is the hardest to regain. After the first month, you can add a month of reconditioning for each month laid off.

Whether your horse is coming back from an injury or beginning to condition for a new season of roping, showing, or trail riding, it is important to not take advantage of these big hearted, willing animals. A little bit of knowledge and good use of your time can boost your enjoyment and increase the longevity of your horse and his soundness. Who knows, you might even benefit from being out there with God's creatures in His phenomenal creation, too!

Kathy O'Neal is a trainer and lifelong horsewoman who lives in Corrales, NM. She specializes in Pinto and Paint horses. She trains, shows, and gives lessons to both children and adults. Kathy may be reached at 505/688-0221, e-mail: kathy@liverytraining.com, or visit www.liverytraining.com.

INNOVATION INSPIRATION INSTRUCTION

Clinton Anderson

HORSEMANSHIP CLINIC

APPLY THE METHOD

- DEVELOP SAFE, RESPONSIVE AND WILLING HORSES
- CREATE A TRUSTING AND RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIP
- OVERCOME YOUR FEARS
- ACCOMPLISH YOUR HORSEMANSHIP GOALS

\$35 ADVANCE SPECTATOR TICKETS
\$70 ADVANCE PURCHASE OF 3 DAY PASS

NO WORRIES CLUB MEMBERS ELIGIBLE FOR SPECIAL DISCOUNTS

JAN 30-FEB 1	CLARKSVILLE, AR	AUG 7-9	LOGAN TWP, NJ
FEB 13-15	TOPEKA, KS	OCT 9-11	OCALA, FL
FEB 27-MAR 1	MOSES LAKE, WA	OCT 23-35	COLORADO SPRINGS, CO
MAY 8-10	SKOWHEGAN, ME	DEC 18-20	GRAHAM, TX
JUL 24-26	TUNICA, MS		

PRESENTED BY
DOWN UNDER HORSEMANSHIP

CLINTONANDERSON.NET • DOWNUNDERHORSEMANSHIP.COM • 888-287-7432